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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: FIRE AT VP BEMBA'S TELEVISION STATIONS ONE DAY,
ROCK-THROWING THE NEXT

REF: A. KINSHASA 1466

1B. KINSHASA 1314 AND SUBSEQUENT

11. (SBU) Summary: A fire broke out September 18 at a building housing offices of Vice President Jean-Pierre Bemba,s MLC party and his television stations. The fire was quickly extinguished, although two serious associated injuries have been reported; there were no Amcits involved. The cause of the fire is unknown, giving rise to intense speculation among MLC partisans. Small crowds of angry MLC supporters and homeless youths have thrown rocks at vehicles and generally disrupted activity in the vicinity of the building September 18 and 19. Bemba told the Ambassador he was acting to calm the situation. The Embassy EAC is following developments closely (reftel A). End summary.

12. (U) A fire broke out during the late afternoon of September 18 at a building housing offices of Vice President Jean-Pierre Bemba,s MLC party and his television stations, CCTV and Canal Kin. The building is located a few minutes from both the Chancery and the Embassy's Joint Administrative Office (JAO). We began receiving reports of the fire at approximately 1630. The fire was brought under control by 1700 or so and did not appear to have spread to adjacent buildings. No American citizens or Embassy personnel were reported injured in the blaze or its aftermath. Emboffs have been informed that both stations, equipment was destroyed in the fire.

13. (U) Bemba was informed of the fire during a meeting with the Ambassador (septel), and immediately called MONUC head Bill Swing to request assistance from MONUC,s fire brigade. The French ambassador called Bemba several minutes later promising additional firefighting assistance. Eyewitnesses reported that rocks were thrown at firetrucks from a crowd of 200-300. According to MONUC sources, eight MONUC armored personnel carriers were also stoned upon arrival, but succeeded in somewhat dispersing the crowd, and firefighters were able to control the blaze.

14. (U) The managing director of CCTV, Stephan Kitutu Oleantua, was apparently the only direct casualty of the fire. Bemba told the Ambassador September 19 that he was hospitalized with second-degree burns and will be medevaced to South Africa. Kasongo Numbi, a friend of the director and a former minister of higher education who is a newly-elected member of the National Assembly, was recognized by some of the crowd as a member of the Kabila-affiliated AMP and attacked as he left CCTV, where he had been invited to present a program. Another station showed footage that

evening of Kasango being grabbed by the crowd and beaten. He is currently hospitalized. No other injuries were reported.

¶5. (SBU) The cause of the fire remains a mystery and subject of much speculation. A preliminary report from MONUC targets faulty electrical wiring. The building was the site of the initial dispute which led to the August 20-22 shootout between Kabila and Bemba troops (reftel B). MLC guards appear to have been in control of the building at the time of the fire. They were to have been replaced September 16 by the Congolese National Police under an agreement negotiated through the Mixed Commission set up to resolve questions raised by the events of August 20-22, but had remained in place.

¶6. (SBU) Marcellin Cishambo, one of President Kabila's political advisors, complained to the Ambassador in a late evening telcom September 18 that Kasango was being held by MLC officials. He said he had contacted Minister of Plan and former Bemba chief of staff Sesango to ask that Kasango be transferred to hospital care. Sesango subsequently confirmed to the Ambassador that Kasango had been admitted to Kinshasa's Ngaliema hospital. Sesango denied that Kasango had been badly beaten. Encouragingly, Cishambo, Sesango and in a later telcon VP Bemba all agreed with the Ambassador that it was important for all officials to do everything possible to calm tension in the aftermath of the fire, and avoid provocative language or actions.

¶7. (SBU) The Kabila government had issued no official comment on the fire by midday September 19. MONUC officials told us today Kabila called Swing from New York, where he is participating in the UNGA, for news on the situation, and described him as "upset" with the events. Bemba has not

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commented publicly, but told the Ambassador he would look forward to the results of an investigation. Thomas Luhaka, the MLC's secretary general and speaker of the parliament, emphasized this same theme, telling a reporter September 19, "We do not know the causes of the fire at this time. We are awaiting the results of the investigation."

¶8. (SBU) However, many in the MLC see the fire as a deliberate act of sabotage. Several dozen groups of MLC supporters and homeless youths ("shegues" in local terminology) gathered around the building on the morning of September 19. Others threw stones at passing vehicles at a traffic circle close by the Embassy JAO and shouted slogans against the international community. Still others set tires afire at the nearby Avenue du 30 Juin, the city's main boulevard. The Ambassador spoke in the morning with Bemba, who told him he was taking steps to calm the situation. The press is now reporting MLC members, both armed and civilian, on the streets calling for the crowds to disperse.

¶9. (SBU) By the afternoon of September 19, it appeared that remaining disturbances were principally due to the unemployed "shegues" who were engaged in a cat-and-mouse action with the police seeking to disperse them. MONUC and EUFOR units were on stations, but apparently leaving operations to the police. We have received no/no reports of FARDC soldiers from either Kabila's or Bemba's camp involved, and no reports of further injuries.

¶10. (SBU) The Embassy EAC is following the situation closely and we will report any new developments.

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